Forum for Modern Language Studies Vol. 59, No. 1, https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqad014
Advance Access Publication 16 March 2023

WRITING MILAN AND TURIN IN THE LIGHT OF (FAILED) UTOPIA: LUCIANO BIANCIARDI AND PAOLO VOLPONI

GIULIA BRECCIAROLI

ABSTRACT

This article examines a series of novels by Italian writers, Luciano Bianciardi and Paolo Volponi, that capture the transformations brought about by the post-World War II economic growth in the urban-industrial society of Northern Italy. The analysis draws on utopia as, in Ruth Levitas's words, a 'desire for a better way of living and being' and explores how the writers' frustrated aspirations for social reform result in a dystopic portrayal of Milan and Turin, seen as sites of social injustice, anomie and authoritative power. Italy's unprocessed past traumas reverberate through urban descriptions: the threat of totalitarianism lingers in industrial architecture and the ways in which urban spaces are organized. Textual analysis refers to Michel Foucault to explore how spatial organization may enhance individualism and productivity. As powerful economic centres, Milan and Turin are privileged locations from which Bianciardi and Volponi reflect on the idiosyncrasies of modernization and on their failed utopian ambitions for a more egalitarian Italian society.

Keywords: Utopia/dystopia; Literary Urban Studies; post-war Italian literature; Luciano Bianciardi; Paolo Volponi; Milan; Turin

A POPULARIZED CONCEPT LIKE UTOPIA may appear deceptively simple. When we use it in daily parlance, we fail to acknowledge that utopia eludes a stable definition. As a blueprint for an ideal society in the tradition inaugurated by Thomas More's 1516 socio-political satire *Utopia*, the term's everyday acceptation is often intended in a derogatory manner to describe an escapist fantasy. It has also been seen as an innate human impulse towards something better, most notably by Ernst Bloch.[1] For Michel Foucault utopia is a 'placeless place': an idealized version of a given society that exists only in the imagination.[2] Foucault distinguishes between utopia and heterotopia, a sort of 'enacted utopia', which is a real but separate and liminal place that mirrors the culture and society that generates it and which it challenges.[3] Every society produces heterotopias: Foucault cites the boarding school, hospital, prison and asylum among other examples. In this article I work with the inclusive definition put forward by Ruth Levitas that explains historical and cultural variations of utopia by claiming that at the core of any utopian perspective there is 'a desire for a better way of living

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and being'.[4] Levitas's emphasis is not so much on human nature as on the socially constructed and historically variable specificity of this need to satisfy one's own desires and realize one's own potential through the means available in a given society. What one may detect in the novels of the Italian writers Luciano Bianciardi and Paolo Volponi, whose work I have chosen to examine here, is precisely a frustrated desire for social change. The writers do not provide a systematic utopian project, in the sense that they do not describe in their œuvre the contours of their ideal society (with the intriguing exception of the half-serious, half-facetious sketch of anti-urban society in Bianciardi's *La vita agra* [*It's a Hard Life*] (1962) to which I will return later). The idea that both writers have for a better society emerges indirectly and in opposition to their description of the 1960s and 1970s urban-industrial society of Northern Italy.

Utopia and dystopia beyond post-war Italy's economic boom

The generation of leftist Italian intellectuals who were active in the post-war years saw the end of the war, and of the Fascist regime, as an opportunity to build a more egalitarian society in which the lower classes would not be left behind, often drawing on the myth of the Resistance and the ideals that that movement had embodied. Soon enough, however, it was clear to them that the society that emerged from the Reconstruction period and subsequent economic development was not devoid of problems and inequalities. And yet, when one thinks of the 1950s in Italy, what comes to mind is a somewhat romanticized and celebratory narrative of that historical period, whose most iconic and memorable images are perhaps those of good-looking young people speeding by on their brand new Lambretta or in their Fiat Cinquecento, *Roman Holiday*-style. It is not at all uncommon for Italians today to compare the present state of Italian society with the post-war years, when allegedly things were 'working' and the country seemed to be heading towards a more prosperous and peaceful future.

The boom itself took place in just a handful of years, conventionally dated from 1958 to 1963, by which time the unprecedented growth had begun to slow down. The international economic crisis that affected advanced capitalist countries from 1973 onwards put an end to the positive phase entirely. The fact that the transformations in Italian society occurred in such a remarkably short period of time and were followed by a downward trend of the global economy only a decade later certainly had a deep impact on the course of action taken by Italian governments and their ability to ease the major socio-political tensions of those years.[5] It is also worth noting that, from the end of the 1970s, postmodern ideas were more systematically consolidated in Italian literary circles, inaugurating a new epoch of Italian cultural history.[6] The novels examined here embrace these two decades. Bianciardi's *L'integrazione* [*Integration*] was published in 1960 at the height of the economic 'miracle'; Volponi's *Le mosche del capitale* [*The Flies of Capital*] came out in 1989 but refers to events that took place during the previous decade, such as the Fiat strikes and the so-called

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march of the forty thousand, to which I shall return later. Indeed, Volponi started writing *Le mosche del capitale* in 1975.

While the economic boom brought about increased wealth and well-being as well as a more secularized and democratic notion of leisure time for the expanding middle class, it is also the case that such changes were not supported by a far-reaching programme of social reforms.[7] Post-war Italian governments ultimately failed to tackle long-standing social issues and to foster a robust sense of civic belonging, based on a critical reckoning with the totalitarian past. The largely unregulated nature of the boom meant that development was uneven, with some of the existing inequalities and territorial imbalances deepening.[8] This was especially the case with the traditional gap between Northern and Southern Italy, which became even more starkly evident due to a process of economic growth that overwhelmingly benefited the richer and more industrialized North. Writers and filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s captured the idiosyncrasies of the historical transition in their work and gave a troubling portrayal of those years, often focusing on urban environments that were puzzling and frightening because of the tangible scale of transformation and starker inequalities in evidence there. This is certainly the case with Bianciardi and Volponi.

By focusing on these two writers, I have chosen to address the theme of utopia from the point of view of its negative counterpart: dystopia.[9] It is in this light that Bianciardi and Volponi have mostly read the processes of industrialization and urbanization that Italian society underwent from the late 1950s onwards. I argue, however, that the absence of utopia in the texts examined here masks the centrality of aspirations for social change in the work and worldview of Bianciardi and Volponi. In other words, if the two writers depict menacing, even dystopic urban environments, it is because they measure the current state of affairs against an alternative idea of society that they have in mind.

The narrative trajectory of *L'integrazione* and *La vita agra* chronicles Bianciardi's disillusionment after he moves to Milan from his hometown of Grosseto in rural Tuscany. He realizes that intellectual work has been commodified like any other activity in post-war mass consumerist society and gradually becomes disenchanted with the socialist ideals that he had entertained up until that point. Volponi's œuvre expresses similar concerns about post-war Italian society. In his case, however, utopia takes on a specific meaning, inextricably linked with the project of entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti (head of the famous typewriter manufacturer who employed Volponi and other intellectuals in his company) to reform Italian industry so that it would not merely be profit-oriented but would promote the rights and well-being of the workers by ensuring better working conditions, welfare services such as nurseries, a good work-life balance and the pursuit of intellectual interests (the Olivetti headquarters in Ivrea had a library and rooms for film screenings).[10] The fact that Olivetti is still celebrated as a rare example of a visionary and enlightened entrepreneur shows how he remains an isolated figure within the history of Italian industry. In his books Volponi describes factory environments that, far from being the progressive and supportive workplace envisaged by Olivetti, are dehumanizing and discriminatory. Alienated characters like Albino Saluggia in *Memoriale*

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[*The Memorandum*] (1962) have no time or energy to engage in activities other than work. Consequently, the action in the novel takes place overwhelmingly in the working environment. The space of economic production has grown disproportionately; the city with its spaces of leisure has shrunk and has almost come to coincide with industry itself. Whilst (to paraphrase the title of this special issue) Bianciardi and Volponi write their cities, Milan and Turin, in the light of dystopia, they do so precisely because an alternative to the present order is always alive in their minds. Utopia and dystopia are two faces of the same coin: one implies the other and would ultimately lose meaning without it.

A further point to make is that dystopian literature, especially in its cross-fertilizations with the genre of science fiction, is generally set in an imagined future where the fact that alarming signals and dangers have been ignored means that a worst-case scenario has concretized.[11] In the case of Bianciardi and Volponi, however, the present unfolding before their eyes is dystopic.[12] The notions of utopia/dystopia that I draw on here are therefore closely connected to the historical contingencies of post-war Italian society: the hopes that accompanied the defeat of Nazi-fascism and the creation of the post-war Republic based on a democratic and still largely admired Constitution, on the one hand, and the contradictions of post-war Italian society on the other. The latter are specifically analysed here from the point of view of the model of urbanization that mirrored and reproduced inequalities at the heart of the new socio-economic landscape. The aspirations and disillusionment of Bianciardi and Volponi play out in their perception and conceptualization of the changing urban environments in which they lived.

Luciano Bianciardi's Milan as 'dystopic' America

L'integrazione is a largely autobiographical novel that narrates Bianciardi's experience of moving from Tuscany to Milan in the 1950s to join the newly founded Feltrinelli publishing house; it is usually seen as part of a trilogy with *Il lavoro culturale* [*Cultural Work*] (1958) and the better-known *La vita agra*. Luciano, the main character in the book and the author's namesake (as will be the case again in *La vita agra*) moves to Milan with his brother Marcello. The two brothers reflect different attitudes in the way they adjust to life in the big city, Marcello being more pragmatic and disillusioned from the start, Luciano soon wanting to go back to a more tranquil life in Tuscany. Eventually they come to embody two opposite tales of urban self-realization: Luciano becomes the 'integrated' one to whom the book's title alludes, fully compliant with the lifestyle of an ambitious Milanese; Marcello struggles to make ends meet with precarious forms of employment, writing anything from romance novels to articles for newspapers and magazines, encyclopaedia entries and translations (which reflects much more closely Bianciardi's actual experience in Milan).

When, not long after they have arrived in Milan, Luciano tells Marcello that he thinks they should leave and go back to Tuscany, the latter accuses him of provincialism. Luciano hears his brother's scornful voice in his head: 'Cosa mi credevo? Che la

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grande città fosse quel luogo di meraviglie e di godurie che credono certi?'[13] [What did I believe? That the great city was that place of wonders and pleasures that some people think it is?]. It is simply naïve to believe that Milan is a land of plenty in which opportunities and success await the bold. The idea, shared by many of those who took the journey up North towards the 'capital of the miracle' in the 1950s and 1960s, that Milan was a sort of close-at-hand version of America, is mocked and debunked. It has been estimated that between 1955 and 1971, some 9,140,000 Italians moved to a place in the peninsula outside their region of origin, with Milan, Turin and other cities of the North registering the largest numbers of arrivals.[14] In *L'integrazione* and *La vita agra*, Milan, the modern metropolis that more than any other Italian city has embodied the dynamism of post-war progress, is the place where hopes and aspirations turn into bitter disappointment through the characters coming into contact with the real implications of the modernization process. The economically 'unfit' are marginalized and new forms of exploitation and alienation have emerged in the hyper-competitive landscape of the big city. Bianciardi denounces these injustices with a clarity and perceptivity that are still very much relevant today.

One cannot help but recall another harshly critical voice of post-war Italian society and especially of emerging mass consumerism, that of Pier Paolo Pasolini, who went as far as to consider the latter a new, perhaps concealed and therefore potentially more insidious form of fascism.[15] Pasolini's idea of cultural levelling or homogenization, according to which working-class culture had vanished and become assimilated into a single and dominant cultural model, due to urbanization and the rural exodus, has been criticized for being too reductive and for not taking into account forms of resistance engendered by the dominant capitalist ideology.[16] Nevertheless, the dire consequences of an unregulated system of production and consumption have become dramatically clear in the decades since Pasolini's and Bianciardi's time, in terms for instance of the exploitation of natural resources as well as the perceived loss of meaning that comes with a materialist lifestyle. One may argue that Bianciardi foresaw this outcome. Urban descriptions, in his novels, convey an idea of post-war Milan as threatening. Modern buildings are grotesque and menacing, while spatial organization enhances productivity and acquiescence. His characters' nonconformity manifests itself through their inability to comply with the demands of modern urban life. In what follows, I will look at both *La vita agra* and *L'integrazione*, which has so far received less scholarly attention than the former, more successful novel.

Bianciardi shared with the many Italians who in the boom years moved to the richer North in search of better living conditions, the hope that the big city would bring fulfilment and professional recognition, albeit perhaps in the blasé and non-committal way which was typical of him. Originating from the Tuscan town of Grosseto, he had accepted the offer of Gian Giacomo Feltrinelli to join his newly established publishing house. *L'integrazione* is mostly an account of the initial stages of that enterprise to which the novel refers, in Bianciardi's usual bitterly ironic manner, as 'la grossa iniziativa' (*I*, 25) [the big initiative]. Bianciardi had been one of the politically committed intellectuals, or *intellettuali impegnati* of his generation, drawing on the legacy of the Italian Resistance. Nevertheless, he had started questioning the

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meaning and utility of his activity as an intellectual after the accident at the Ribolla mine in Tuscany in which forty-three miners lost their lives.[17] Bianciardi had written about their living and working conditions just a few years before in the reportage *I minatori della Maremma* [*Miners of the Maremma*] (1956), which he co-authored with Carlo Cassola. One may therefore imagine that, in moving to Milan, Bianciardi was hoping to find renewed confidence and inspiration for his work as an intellectual and writer.

Hence, it does not surprise that in *L'integrazione* Milan is often treated by analogy with America as almost a mythical dreamland for the Italians who migrated there in huge numbers from the nineteenth century onward, escaping extreme poverty, particularly, but by no means exclusively, from the Southern regions.[18] After World War II, America's standing as the main global power in the new world order of the cold war made it a land of prosperity and opportunities. Coming into contact with American soldiers stationed in Italy during the liberation phase and its aftermath, Italians were able to get a taste of the more opulent American lifestyle, which took on a glittering aura. The Milan of the boom reflected some of that aura; yet, to Luciano and Marcello, it appears to be 'un' America soltanto negativa, rovesciata nel cannocchiale' (*I*, 31) [a merely negative America, turned upside down in the telescope]. As Marcello puts it,

> Lì almeno alla tensione, alla fatica, corrispondono certi vantaggi veri, se non altro quelli di sentirsi parte di una enorme potenza. [...] Qui invece tu non hai l'America, ma l'americanismo semmai, una copia cioè che riprende del modello solo gli aspetti negativi, senza darti nulla in cambio. (*I*, 31)
>
> [There at least there are certain real advantages that compensate for the tension and the fatigue, if only those of feeling part of an enormous power. [...] Here, on the other hand, you don't have America, but Americanism, if anything, a copy that takes up only the negative aspects of the model, without giving you anything in return.]

While Milan may seem to be the new dreamland of post-war Italy, it is in actuality only a faded, grotesque copy of its more exotic counterpart, the United States. Bianciardi's debunking of this myth conveys his disapproval of the type of society modelled on North American ideals of liberalism and hyper-consumerism, of which Milan is the clearest embodiment in Italy. The utopia/dystopia dichotomy is manifest here as Milan reveals the dark side of any 'American dream' of freedom, happiness and unlimited opportunities. Bianciardi describes the small-mindedness and petty politics of the office environment, the labour exploitation and the fierce competition of the big city.

The sense of frustration and disillusionment reverberates through Bianciardi's urban descriptions. The first thing that strikes Luciano as he arrives in Milan are the narrow sidewalks: pedestrians have been displaced to make way for automobiles, which form a seemingly incessant stream down the city's streets (*I*, 15). It is not by chance that the book opens with a praise of the act of walking for leisure, an activity that has traditionally cemented community life in Grosseto. People find each other, socialize and inhabit their urban environment through this *passeggio* [walking at a

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leisurely pace], a custom that still today may be observed in the old centres of any small-sized city in Italy. In the first few pages of the book, the emphasis on the slow pace of life in Grosseto is linked to the idea that people in the small Tuscan city still live in a harmonious relationship with nature and the cycle of seasons (*I*, 14–15). The dichotomy that Bianciardi establishes between Grosseto and Milan brings to mind Michel de Certeau's reflections on the importance of the act of walking as a way of appropriating space and subverting established itineraries. By reworking official and accepted routes, one may reclaim urban areas that would otherwise be deemed as marginal and therefore enable a different experience of the city.[19]

This 'unproductive' idea of walking acquires particular prominence in *La vita agra*, where it serves to emphasize Luciano's incompatibility with modern metropolitan life and its requirements. Contrary to the crowds of people that hurry past him on their way to work, he is slow and meditative, pauses, looks around. This odd demeanour makes him resemble something of a maverick and ends up attracting the attention of the vice squad. Here, Luciano clearly embodies a modern flâneur who has no place in a society where walking is seen as a way of getting from one activity to the next. Walking for leisure is penalized in an urban system that encourages uniformity and conformity by prioritizing work and productivity over other, perhaps more creative and unconventional pursuits.[20] This attitude is indicative of a disciplinary spatial regime that demands efficiency and therefore opposes the uneconomical and irrelevant. For the same reason, automobiles, fast-moving vehicles that can get one quickly from one point to another, have an uncontested central role in modern street planning.[21] Bianciardi describes them as grotesque or even zoomorphic, for example when some vehicles that have been parked with their wheels on the sidewalk resemble 'grosse bestie ferme lì per orinare' (*I*, 17) [big beasts stopping there to urinate]. Elsewhere, he describes cars as

> Grossi oggetti di ferro lucido e vetro, avventati a corsa eguale, sempre lo stesso distacco fra l'una e l'altra, quasi che non si muovessero per energia propria, ma per via di una sola forza gigantesca, capace di trascinarle tutte legate a un filo invisibile ma saldissimo. (*I*, 15)
>
> [Large objects of polished iron and glass, surging forward at the same speed, always the same distance between one and the other, as if they did not move by their own energy, but as a result of a single gigantic force, capable of dragging them all, linked to an invisible but very strong wire.]

Bianciardi establishes a clear equation between movement and the productivity rates that are imposed on the Milanese population. In this sense, his work may be linked to Michel Foucault's theory of the relation between power and spatial organization along with his idea of apparatus. Foucault argues that between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, power shifted from the control of borders (sovereignty) to that of the social body and the mechanisms of production and reproduction (discipline) in conjunction with 'an extension and refinement of punitive practices'.[22] Disciplinary power has an essential spatial component.[23] Bearing in mind Foucault's description of an apparatus, or *dispositif*, as any set of practices and strategies that aim to restrain individuals by training them, controlling their behaviour and therefore 'normalizing'

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them,[24] it can be argued that the way in which movement is organized and regulated in *La vita agra* links modern Milan to the functioning of the apparatus.[25] Bianciardi argues that modern transport only guarantees a false freedom of movement, for it funnels people to specific areas and itineraries within the city, chiefly the journey from home to work and vice versa. This limited freedom comes with a price that not everyone can pay, for not everyone can afford a car or the cost of commuting by public transport (*VA*, 96). The dominance of car traffic also has the effect of marginalizing other city users like cyclists and pedestrians. Mobility in Milan is purpose-oriented and elitist. In this sense, it also replicates relations of power.

This idea is further corroborated by the presence of military metaphors, which liken modern urban lifestyle and the roads clogged with traffic to a warlike situation.[26] Widespread roadworks, which bear witness to the building frenzy of the boom years, limit pedestrian space further and generally give the impression of a city that is almost under siege. The construction site outside Marcello's place, at the end of *L'integrazione*, resembles 'il complicato tracciato delle trincee e dei camminamenti' (*I*, 107) [the complicated layout of trenches and passageways]. The descriptions of modern urban architecture convey similar feelings. In *La vita agra*, the tower blocks of Milan's financial district are described as 'un blocco militaresco, coi suoi ponti levatoi, le sue muraglie imprendibili, i suoi camminamenti coperti, le sue aree bertesche' (*VA*, 38) ['a fortress complete with drawbridges, impregnable walls, covered passageways and aerial corridors' (*HL*, 31)]. *La vita agra* was written in the same years that witnessed the creation in Milan of the Velasca (1960) and Pirelli (1961) towers, which became iconographic symbols of the economic boom. Bianciardi's description of the impressive and somewhat disturbing and frightening high-rise buildings – 'torracchioni [...] di vetro, di alluminio, di pietra lustrata' (*VA*, 38) ['towers built of glass and aluminium and shiny stone' (*HL*, 31)] – evokes a futuristic and dystopian aesthetic in order to convey that these megastructures are the spatial concretization of industrial capitalism with its inherent social inequality. Bianciardi's emphasis on the changing scale of the built environment and on modern building materials clearly inspires feelings of alienation as well as hinting at the latent violence of capitalist space.[27]

These descriptions of authoritarian urban spaces point to Bianciardi's disillusionment concerning the very possibility of a just society and, arguably, to an uncanny resurgence of the totalitarian past. In the context of his theory of the survival of a fascist mentality in the post-war Italian Republic, Mirco Dondi has pointed out that in those years 'an authoritarian political solution was always on the cards'.[28] The 1950s witnessed, indeed, the consolidation of attitudes and institutions that are rooted in 1920s and 1930s Italy.[29] More specifically, there is evidence of the persistence of practices of repression and intimidation, especially towards members of the Communist Party and left-wing activists more broadly, which found a new justification in the climate of the Cold War and in the context of the anti-Communist alliance between the countries of the Western block.[30] A real process of de-fascistization, that is, a political purge of Fascist individuals and institutions, was never accomplished.[31] On the one hand, a consensus on how the cleansing process was to be carried out proved difficult to achieve due to the presence on Italian territory in the aftermath of the war

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of a mosaic of military and political forces with differing views and aims.[32] On the other, the initial willingness of the political parties and particularly the Christian Democrats (Democrazia Cristiana; DC), the Italian party in the majority throughout the 1950s, to carry out the purge, waned as it became clear that a substantial portion of Italian society, including key officials, had in various degrees been involved with the regime.[33]

Towards the end of *La vita agra*, Bianciardi sketches a utopian anti-urban project with a strong anarchist element, based on the rejection of modern lifestyles and the false needs created by consumerist culture. This alternative idea of society envisages the return to a pre-urban condition through self-organized forms of collective communities that abandon private property and live as close to a state of nature as possible. However, it is mostly just an escapist fantasy which reveals Bianciardi's growing cynicism and frustration with the society of the boom.

Industrial dream turned dystopic: Paolo Volponi

Volponi's frustrated aspirations for social reforms in post-war Italian society and industry also reverberate through the representation of Turin and its metropolitan area, specifically the industrial city of Ivrea, in his œuvre. Turin is one of the centres of the so-called 'Industrial Triangle' together with Milan and Genoa and notably the home to the giant car manufacturer Fiat; Ivrea has historically been the headquarters of Olivetti. One of Volponi's peculiarities as a writer is his direct involvement with industry: he was head of the social services division at Olivetti, where he worked from 1956 to 1966, and subsequently joined Fiat as an adviser to the leadership on issues concerning the relationship between the factory and its urban environment. Volponi is an emblematic figure within the strand of Italian industrial literature that develops in the 1950s and 1960s, and is roughly circumscribed by the publication, in 1957, of Ottiero Ottieri's *Tempi stretti* [*Tight Times*] and Bianciardi's *Il lavoro culturale*, and that of Goffredo Parise's *Il padrone* [*The Boss*] in 1965.[34] Many of the works belonging to the tradition of Italian industrial literature have focused on the themes of alienation and mental illness that result from the repetitiveness and apparent lack of meaning of industrial work. The *romanzo industriale* [industrial novel] also undertook a revision of traditional narrative modes, language and style in order to explore more effectively the socio-economic changes and their repercussions on the working class.[35] At Olivetti and Fiat Volponi was able to witness first-hand two different models of industrial management and to draw on this experience for his novels.

The idea of utopia in Volponi's œuvre is inspired by the industrial model envisaged by Adriano Olivetti: a type of industry that would not merely be concerned with the maximization of profit but that would actively strive to improve the workers' well-being and living conditions and to encourage their intellectual development through cultural initiatives.[36] It is therefore notable that Volponi's novels describe something rather different, that is, an industrial environment that has dehumanizing and alienating effects on the workers. This is clearly the case with Albino Saluggia, the protagonist-narrator of *Memoriale*, who suffers from persecution mania and lives

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in a state of acute internal conflict with regards to the factory where he works, oscillating between infatuation and hate.[37] Ultimately, it is clear that the factory environment exacerbates his already frail mental health. Nevertheless, *Memoriale* should not be read as a criticism directed at Olivetti but rather at the generation of entrepreneurs that took over after his death in 1960 and were incapable of carrying his projects and ideals forward, more interested as they were in pursuing personal interest.[38] *Le mosche del capitale* bears witness to the industrial environment at Fiat, characterized by a generally hostile attitude towards the workers' demands. This later novel belongs to a different phase of recent Italian history: the rhetoric of the boom years has subsided; Italy has entered a phase of economic recession and is beset by domestic terrorism; a bloody stream of bombings and terrorist acts that have gone down in history as the *anni di piombo* [years of lead].

The first thing to note about Volponi's urban descriptions is their scarcity: an absence that, as is often the case, may tell us a good deal. I would argue that the limited references to the urban environment reflect the pervasive nature of capitalism and more specifically the fact that the space of industry has expanded so as to virtually incorporate the surrounding environment. The city is an appendix to industry, which explains why so much of what happens (or does not happen) within it and so much of the characters' lives gravitate around the factory. This is all the more significant since Olivetti's project was instead to integrate the factory buildings with the surrounding landscape, both architectonically and in terms of the proximity of services and amenities that would assure a flexible work-life balance for his workers. The issue of a more harmonious integration between industry and the city must have been close to Volponi's heart too if one considers that that was precisely what his job at Fiat involved. The fact that so much of what goes on in his novels takes place within the industrial environment, reveals that industrial work as it was then organized is for Volponi draining and totalizing. His characters do not have the time or energy for other activities, let alone to take advantage of the amenities and opportunities for entertainment and socialization that the city has to offer. The dominance of industry is visually asserted by the imposing and threatening size of the factory in both the novels. In *Memoriale*, the factory is 'grandissima' [huge], while in *Le mosche del capitale*, the strike organized by a group of workers comes to a halt in front of the company headquarters, which has the appearance of an unconquerable fortress.[39] This incompatibility between the space of industry and the space of the city is reaffirmed, for instance, in the following extract from *Memoriale*:

> Stanno tutti dentro la fabbrica, che non si vede nemmeno. È messa fuori, come da noi i carceri o i cimiteri. A passarle davanti mette paura. In giro ci sono solo donne, vecchi e malati. La domenica poi, non c'è più nessuno.[40]
>
> [Everyone is in the factory, and it's not even in the city. It's outside the city where we put our jails and our cemeteries. When you walk by it frightens you. The only people you see around are women, old men, and invalids. On Sunday there isn't a soul to be found.][41]

With everyone at work, except for some women and sick and old people, the streets are almost empty, as if the factory has sucked the life out of the city. Despite being

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hidden away like a prison or a cemetery – sites that elicit feelings related to illness, death and containment and are generally located on the edges of the city – the factory dominates the city's mental environment.

In *Le mosche del capitale*, the fictional cities Salisborgo C. and Bovino, where the industrial plants of MFM and Megagruppo are respectively located, are clearly Ivrea and Turin, seats of Olivetti and Fiat. Bovino is described as 'la città sottomessa' [the subjugated city]: presumably subjugated to the logic of capital. [42] The adjective *bovino* [bovine] itself evokes dullness and unconditional obedience. The identity of Turin is bound to the presence of Fiat, which dominated car production in the post-war years. The opening scene of *Le mosche del capitale* captures the city dwellers asleep and unaware while the capitalist system, here embodied by a gigantic calculator, is relentlessly at work, fuelling economic expansion and urban growth.

La grande città industriale riempie la notte di febbraio senza luna, tre ore prima dell'alba. Dormono tutti o quasi, e anche coloro che sono svegli giacciono smemorati e persi. [...] Il sonno si spande senza alcuna innocenza, e non per fisico gravame, ma come ulteriore dato e calcolo delle compatibilità favorevoli al capitale. Tutta la città gli è sottoposta; così ciascun dormiente, ciascuno nel suo posto e letto, nel proprio sonno come in quello più grande e generale che si svuota di vapori. Il calcolatore guida e controlla, concede rincorre codifica assume imprime. (*LM*, 5–6)

[The large industrial city fills the moonless February night, three hours before dawn. Almost all of them are asleep, and even those who are awake lie there oblivious and lost. [...] Sleep spreads without any innocence, and not as a physical burden, but as a further datum and calculation of the combinations favorable to capital. The whole city is subject to it; so each sleeper, each in the bed where they belong, in their own sleep as in the larger and more general one that exhales an enormous breath. The computer guides and controls, enables, searches, encodes, accepts and imprints.]

This is a numb sleep without memory or dreams, not innocent but culpable, as if the whole urban population was to be held accountable for letting capital perpetrate its injustices in the name of modernization and profit. Indeed, in the novel the economy grows and fosters urban development at the price of increasing exploitation and marginalization of the lower classes and the vulnerable.

Intriguingly, in *Le mosche del capitale* we mostly get glimpses of Bovino from the windows of the corporate headquarters: a view from on high that reverses Luciano's street-level gaze when, in *La vita agra*, he glances up at the *torracchioni* [big towers] of Milan's business core. The principle, however, remains the same: the verticality of buildings refers symbolically, as Henri Lefebvre has put it, to the authority of a 'potentially violent power'.[43] In *Le mosche del capitale*, urban space therefore appears even more distant and rarefied. The book describes a city in which people live their lives confined either to their home or the workplace. The action takes place almost exclusively indoors and when the characters move across the urban space, they do so mostly by car. One may argue that Bovino is reminiscent of Foucault's plague-stricken town as 'a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism'.[44] Foucault argues that the plague regulations and measures of containment that were implemented in

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sixteenth- and seventeenth-century towns in the case of an epidemic outbreak betray more broadly an ancestral fear of contagion, of any potential element of chaos and disorder which might disrupt the status quo.[45] A similar utopia/dystopia of the 'perfectly governed', 'immobilized'[46] city is realized in *Le mosche del capitale*, where any potential threat to the dominant order has seemingly been neutralized and the city of Bovino has turned into a disciplined and aseptic space with docile and passive citizens. The beginning of the novel is particularly emblematic in this regard as it captures the inhabitants of Bovino in a dreamless sleep that resembles lethargy.

Le mosche del capitale is peppered with references to Fascist legacies in post-war Italian society. The issue is raised for instance by the character of Radames, a security guard at MFM. In a speech replete with fascist and imperialist tropes, Radames calls for the necessity of infiltrating authoritarian elements into the Italian public administration, police and judicial and school systems in order to exert influence and control over democratic institutions (*LM*, 90). In this way, he maintains, Italian people will again be 'ordinato e laborioso, serio, ubbidiente' (*LM*, 91) [orderly and hardworking, serious, obedient] as they used to be under the Fascist regime (*LM*, 92). Through Radames's speech, Volponi denounces the abuses perpetrated by the Italian industrial leadership in the years during which Fiat and other companies aligned with the repressive attitudes of post-war governments, for instance through the creation of anti-strike rewards and practices of discrimination towards members of the *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL) [General Confederation of Labour], Italy's largest union.[47] Radames's hard-line approach is reaffirmed through the march of Fiat managers in Bovino's streets towards the end of the novel. A real historical event, the so-called 'march of the forty thousand', took place on 14 October 1980 and was part of a strategy of intimidation carried out by the Fiat leadership in response to a series of strikes organized by the workers. The episode led the CGIL to make concessions that were favourable to the Fiat management. In the passage below, the industrial managers march in a threatening procession across the city, like an army ready to be deployed, thereby reaffirming their power.

> I quarantamila passavano per il centro ben coperti e compatti nel grigio degli abiti e nel blu delle scarpe [...]. Quarantamila capi silenziosi e disciplinati, ben pettinati e calzati. (*LM*, 262)
>
> [The forty thousand passed through the centre well-clothed and compact in their grey suits and blue shoes [...]. Forty thousand silent and disciplined bosses, well combed and shod.]

In the novel, there is therefore a strong perception of the authoritarian threat that has haunted post-war Italian society.[48] Descriptions of the urban and industrial environments bear witness to Volponi's disillusionment following the failure of Olivetti's utopian project. In novels such as *Memoriale* and even more so in *Le mosche del capitale*, the writer presents a pessimistic view of Italian industry and society, which is seemingly beyond hope.

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Conclusions

In Bianciardi's novels, urban modernity is largely a synonym for alienation, isolation and social inequality, which have been central themes and concerns throughout modern urban history, as conceived in the early sociological studies of Georg Simmel, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim through to Modernist theories and beyond. The 'integration' referred to in its title is fully realized at the end of his novel, which sees Luciano settled into the 'respectable' life of a proper Milan citizen. As he puts it: 'Ho la sensazione, finalmente, di essere nel giusto, nel gioco anzi, di partecipare costruttivamente alla vita di questa grande città' (*I*, 95) [I have the feeling, finally, of being on the right side of things, a player in this game, of participating constructively in the life of this great city]. Luciano now has a wife, owns a flat ('la dimora di un dirigente in formazione' (*I*, 95) [the residence of a future executive]) and works with a publisher of books on marketing, fully embracing the productivity and proactivity manifesto that those texts promote. This utilitarian view that leaves no room for the irrelevant or 'useless' is clearly the antithesis of the ideals that the younger Bianciardi had championed as a committed intellectual in Grosseto and of the aspirations with which he had moved to Milan. The reality of the big city prompts disillusionment. The threat of totalitarianism lingers in urban architecture and the rational and efficient way in which mobility and productivity are organized within the city. The military metaphors that one finds in both *L'integrazione* and *La vita agra* testify to a complex relationship with the past.

Volponi is also interested in the theme of the alienation of modern life, but he develops it more in relation to the factory than the urban environment. His criticism of contemporary Italian industry stems from his belief that, if managed wisely, industry may produce the conditions to free individuals from the need to work long hours to maintain themselves and their families.[49] This article has detected in Volponi's novels a sort of inflation of the industrial environment, which assumes grotesque and monstrous contours.[50] As a consequence of the predominance of industry, the space of the city has seemingly shrunk. The general lack of urban scenes in *Memoriale* and *Le mosche del capitale* has been linked to the fact that, far from being the empowering activity envisaged by Olivetti, industrial work is alienating and draining. The workers have little mental and physical energy left to engage with their urban environment and the leisure activities that this may offer. The city therefore recedes into the background. As a sort of extension of industry, it ensures that the right conditions for continuing productivity are in place. It is also noteworthy that, in *Le mosche del capitale*, urban space is mostly gazed upon from the palaces of power; an objectifying view from on high that reflects the perspective of the powerful classes.

I have here examined the dichotomy between utopia and dystopia within the context of post-war modernization in Italy and the controversial and even conflicting processes that propelled it. In the examined novels, the frustrated aspirations for the social reform of Italian society and industry translate into urban descriptions that point, on the one hand, to a (utopic) model of progress that has gone wrong and, on the other, to the (dystopic) persistence of authoritarian tendencies in the Italian

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Republic. Economic development was not accompanied by positive transformations at all levels of Italian society. Post-war Italy was ultimately a conservative and patriarchal society in which the pursuit of profit and personal and professional success were regarded as essential values. This explains the 'irregularity' of characters like Marcello in *L'integrazione*, Luciano in *La vita agra* and Albino in *Memoriale*: they are outcasts who do not fit in to this narrative and for whom any desire for a more just society has collided with reality.

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NOTES

[1] Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[2] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 22–27 (p. 24).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), p. 8.

[5] Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943–1988* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 351.

[6] See Monica Jansen, *Il dibattitto sul postmoderno in Italia: in bilico tra dialettica e ambiguità* (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2002).

[7] Guido Crainz, *Il paese mancato: dal miracolo economico agli anni Ottanta* (Rome: Donzelli, 2003), p. 19.

[8] Ginsborg, *A History*, p. 216.

[9] Peter Fitting considers dystopia and anti-utopia as two different 'negative manifestations' of utopia. See Peter Fitting, 'Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 135–53 (p. 135).

[10] Claire Provost and Simone Lai, 'Story of Cities #21: Olivetti Tries to Build the Ideal "Human City" for its Workers', *The Guardian*, 13 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/apr/13/story-cities-21-adriano-olivetti-ivrea-italy-typewriter-factory-human-city> [accessed 8 March 2022].

[11] Fitting argues that dystopia 'follows the model of "if this goes on": a future in which some aspect of the present had continued and worsened': Fitting, 'Utopia, Dystopia', p. 151. He describes the 'dystopian mood' that imbues the science fiction of the 1960s onwards, as the genre acquires increasing popularity, as 'the sense of a threatened near future': ibid., p. 140.

[12] One should note that Volponi has also engaged with the more traditional genre of dystopian fiction set in the future in his *Il pianeta irritabile* (1978), depicting a post-atomic Italy.

[13] Luciano Bianciardi, *L'integrazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2014), p. 30. All further references will be to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text after the quotation as '*I*'. All English translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[14] Ginsborg, *A History*, p. 219.

[15] Pasolini presented his theories of anthropological revolution and cultural homologation in post-war Italian society in a series of articles that he wrote for *Il Corriere della Sera* and other magazines between 1973 and 1975, which were later collected in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* (Milan: Garzanti, 1990).

[16] John Foot, *Milan Since the Miracle: City, Culture and Identity* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp. 21–23.

[17] Pino Corrias, *Vita agra di un anarchico: Luciano Bianciardi a Milano* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1996), p. 76.

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[18] Donna Gabaccia, for instance, shows how it was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that the number of Italians migrating from the South surpassed that of migrants from Central and Northern Italy, who were originally predominant: see Donna R. Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), pp. 68–69.

[19] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 97–105.

[20] Foucault writes that 'specific to disciplinary penality is non-observance, that which does not measure up to the rule, that departs from it. The whole indefinite domain of the non-conforming is punishable'. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 178–79.

[21] See for instance Nicholas R. Fyfe, 'Introduction: Reading the Street', in *Images of the Street: Planning, Identity and Control in Public Space*, ed. by Nicholas R. Fyfe (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 1–10 (pp. 2–3).

[22] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 77. This shift takes place in conjunction with complex historical transformations, such as the demographic growth of the eighteenth century, the increase in production and rise in school population and therefore the presence of larger groups of individuals to be supervised: ibid., p. 218.

[23] As Foucault puts it, 'discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space': *Discipline and Punish*, p. 141. This can either be realized in enclosed and supervised places – not only prisons but boarding schools, military barracks, workshops and factories, places of confinement of vagabonds – or through the partitioning of individuals in space, where each of them occupies a precise place to avoid concentration and gatherings and to supervise them more effectively. Foucault goes on to explain this latter point in further detail, claiming that disciplinary power does not assign individuals to a fixed position but rather ranks them within a network of power relations: ibid., pp. 145–6.

[24] Foucault has not provided a proper definition of an 'apparatus'. He claims, for instance, that the model of surveillance embodied by Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon represents an 'architectural apparatus', for it concretizes the need of power to rationalize space in order to exert more efficiently and consistently its control on the social body: ibid., p. 201. Giorgio Agamben has written 'I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings'. See Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 14.

[25] Luciano Bianciardi, *La vita agra* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1980). All further references to this novel will be to this edition and given parenthetically as '*VA*'. English translations for this novel will be taken from Luciano Bianciardi, *Vita agra; or, It's a Hard Life*, trans. by Eric Mosbacher (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965). All further references will be to this edition and given parenthetically as '*HL*'.

[26] Examples may be: 'Forse quella, dopo tutto, era l'unica maniera razionale e igienica di muoversi, come appunto al battaglione la marcia in rango del reparto' [Perhaps that, after all, was the only rational and sound way of getting around, just like the marching in rank of a military unit] (*I*, p. 16); and 'Traversavamo la strada in ordine sparso, mai affiancati, proprio come nei film di guerra si vede fare ai soldati americani nella giungla, a caccia di giapponesi' [We crossed the street in no particular order, never side by side, just like you see American soldiers doing in the jungle in war movies, hunting for Japanese] (ibid., p. 54).

[27] In his analysis of the capitalist abstract space, Henri Lefebvre argues that 'every state is born of violence' and that it 'endures only by virtue of violence directed towards a space'. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 280.

[28] Mirco Dondi, 'The Fascist Mentality after Fascism', in *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation*, ed. by Richard J. B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1999), pp. 141–60 (p. 149).

[29] Guido Crainz, *Storia del miracolo italiano. Culture, identità, trasformazioni fra anni cinquanta e sessanta* (Rome: Donzelli, 1996). p. vii.

[30] Ibid., p. viii.

[31] Dondi points out that 'after 1960, neo-fascists, whether members of the MSI or its friends, found positions in the heart of the state, in the secret services, in the military hierarchy, in a fashion

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that would condition Italian life for decades to come, blocking even the most timid move to the Left': 'The Fascist Mentality', p. 155.

[32] Ruth Ben-Ghiat, 'Liberation: Italian Cinema and the Fascist Past, 1945–50', in *Italian Fascism*, ed. by Bosworth and Dogliani, pp. 83–101 (pp. 89–90).

[33] Dondi has observed that 'at least two-thirds of the staff of the Ministry of the Interior would have to be suspended, resulting in a general paralysis of public administration': 'The Fascist Mentality', p. 143.

[34] Rocco Capozzi, 'Dalla "Letteratura e industria" all'industria del postmoderno', *Annali d'Italianistica*, 9 (1991), 144–57 (p. 144). Other authors who have participated in this particular trend are Giovanni Arpino, Lucio Mastronardi with his trilogy that bears witness to the transformations in the Vigevano productive environment, from workshops to small industries, Vasco Pratolini and Alberto Bevilacqua. Italo Calvino was another protagonist of this season, both with books that address post-war modernization and industrial development, and by participating directly in the debate on the renewal of Italian literature through new languages and methods of representation in articles published in journals and magazines. See, for instance, the 1962 issue of *Il Menabò*. Many of these industrial novels are collected in *Fabbrica di carta: i libri che raccontano l'Italia industriale* ed. by Giorgio Bigatti and Giuseppe Lupo (Rome: Laterza, 2013).

[35] Piergiorgio Mori, *Scrittori nel boom: il romanzo industriale negli anni del miracolo italiano* (Rome: EdiLet-Edilazio, 2011), p. 8.

[36] Daniele Fioretti, *Utopia and Dystopia in Postwar Italian Literature: Pasolini, Calvino, Sanguineti, Volponi* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 161. In an analysis of Olivetti's *L'ordine politico delle Comunità*, first published in 1945, Davide Cadeddu examines the political and philosophical beliefs at the heart of the entrepreneur's project for a constitutional reform of post-war Italy. In this way, Cadeddu aims to challenge simplistic interpretations of Olivetti's project as utopian in the sense of fanciful, dream-like or unattainable. Davide Cadeddu, *Reimagining Democracy: On the Political Project of Adriano Olivetti* (New York: Springer, 2012).

[37] Paolo Volponi, *Memoriale* (Milan: Garzanti, 1991).

[38] Fioretti, *Utopia and Dystopia*, p. 163.

[39] Volponi, *Memoriale*, p. 19.

[40] Ibid., p. 219.

[41] Paolo Volponi, *The Memorandum*, trans. by Belén Sevareid (London: Calder & Boyars, 1967), p. 161.

[42] Paolo Volponi, *Le mosche del capitale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991), p. 125. Further references to the novel will be to this edition and will be given parenthetically within the text as '*LM*'.

[43] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 98.

[44] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 197.

[45] 'Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of "contagions", of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder': ibid., p. 198.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Crainz, *Storia del miracolo italiano*, p. 37.

[48] Dondi, 'The Fascist Mentality', pp. 149–50.

[49] See the interview in Gian Carlo Ferretti, *Paolo Volponi* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1972), p. 6.

[50] Another book that presents the corporate environment in such terms is Goffredo Parise's *Il padrone*.

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